

INTRODUCTION

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Knowledge-production, reproduction of culture, and historiography in contemporary India—with some exceptions of challenging attempts in recent years—remains deeply biased and brahmanical, despite the dazzling democratic façade and politically correct vocabulary. Contestations to the dominant discourse and meta-narratives of the past and present by the marginalised majority—dalits, adivasis, other backward classes (OBCs), Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and other suppressed ethnic and regional communities—remains confined to the margins; while brahmanical hegemony continues to overwhelm the intellectual domain. In place everywhere are refurbished, replenished brahmanical canons and constructs which are blithely flaunted as ‘Indian’ and ‘national.’ This, so much so, that the modernisation of brahmanical tradition easily becomes the modernisation of Indian tradition. The Indian elite’s winning trick, right from the colonial nineteenth century to the present, is to selectively cull from the modern European ideas and institutions, and ingeniously align and

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integrate them with the brahmanic structures of caste, class, and gender. The basic design behind such 'change with continuity' is to preserve and innovate upon traditional dominance over the masses. As in the past, so in the present, the over-all objective is to mislead, exploit and exclude the majority.

India remains the most iniquitous society on the earth. The more things change, the more they remain the same. Extreme disparities in terms of wealth, health, and education have given birth to a new form of two-nation theory—the shining India, and the suffering India. Just over ten per cent of the population, mostly from aggressive castes, with different levers of power in their hands, make sure that the rest continue to live in material and mental subjugation, and provide the 'nation' their cheap labour. While all wealth generation and development are taken up in the name of empowering the poor, such 'nation-building' leaves the poor more demoralised, more marginalised. They still struggle for food, drinking water, sanitation, education. Who are these people? More than ninety per cent of them are adivasis, dalits, OBCs, and Muslims. Their representation in the booming market economy, business and industrial domain, information technology, and entertainment industry is next to nothing. However, the embedded brahmanic media and academia presents the growth without equity as development with a humane face. Caste as institutionalised discrimination, both at material and ideological-cultural levels, continues to cripple the lives of millions in several overt and covert ways.

Caste has for centuries been the major civilisational fault-line in the Indian subcontinent. To cut a long and

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complicated story short, the supposed divine division of labour and harmony of caste has always dazzled its creators and beneficiaries, while the demoralised majority condemn it as a vicious system of brahmanic colonialism—the colonialism that drains away the cultural, social, and economic resources within the nation from the productive majority to the parasitic few ensconced at the top of the caste hierarchy. The toxic genius of caste hierarchy and its creators is to divide, disintegrate and dehumanise the toiling majority. Fragmented into hundreds of hierarchically arranged castes and subcastes, each sparring with each other for meagre resources, the productive people fail to build a broader solidarity against their common exploiters.

Birth-based caste provides a breeding ground for mutual animosity. Thus, keeping people divided and weak for exploitation as well as making common activity and effort for the greater good impossible. It was for this precise reason that the caste culture has been patronised and promoted by authoritarian kings and feudal-aristocratic forces of many stripes, including the medieval Mughals and modern British colonisers who saw in caste and brahmanism a uniquely effective tool to subjugate and rule the masses. Colonialism in India, contrary to the dominant belief, was wedded to the forces representing caste and brahmanism. This colonialism was founded on the collusion, collaboration, and mutual interests of British and Indian ruling classes and intelligentsia. The native political and intellectual elites not only provided crafty, selective knowledge to the British about India and things Indian, but also controlled the Raj machinery at the local and intermediate levels. They oiled the wheels of colonialism, playing the role of the

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intermediary between the British rulers and Indian masses. Self-strengthening and modernising themselves with this collaboration, the Indian elites gradually found confidence to build their own brahmanic-casteist nationalism, pretended to represent all Indians, demanded and got a greater share of power within the Raj, and finally launched the movement to kick out the British (Aloysius 1997; Mani 2005).

Nationalism enabled the aggressive castes to project the Vedic-brahmanic culture and consciousness as the basis of Indianness. Their selfish ideals and interests became the national ideals and interests. Despite a variety of formulations—from the nineteenth century pioneers of socio-cultural regeneration such as Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, Vivekananda, to the rightist and leftist leaders of the Indian National Congress like Tilak, Gandhi, Nehru—the common denominator and trajectory of all of them was to selectively accommodate modernity within the traditional caste-class structure, thus maintaining the high caste privileges and dominance over the masses. The most successful, in concocting this brahmanical synthesis of continuity with change, was Gandhi who deftly straddled the worlds of politics and religion, playing the double role of a half-naked saint and a ruthless politician working at the behest of the rich and the powerful. The wily brahmins and allied castes knew the value of Gandhi from the very beginning. They gratefully handed Gandhi the supreme leadership and put him on a pedestal so high that his real face remained invisible to the masses who mistook him for their Mahatma (*ibid.*).

It was this monolithic-brahmanic nationalism that came under frontal attack from leaders of the lower orders, the

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founders of anti-caste or non-brahman movements that erupted in many parts of the subcontinent during the colonial period. Aligning themselves with the long non-brahmanic traditions of resistance for equality and freedom of all, they argued that the brahmanic religio-social system was more sinister than British colonialism, and therefore its annihilation must constitute an integral part of nation-building.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity and diversity of articulations depending on time, space and regional variations, what the anti-caste leaders unmistakably stressed and struggled for, was social justice and social democracy. They fought pitched battles for doing away with caste and social barriers. They took to the streets for civil and human rights of the caste-oppressed. They stood for a new society based on non-brahmanic and democratic values. These leaders who struggled for the deconstruction of brahmanism and demanded socio-cultural reconstruction have been dismissed in the dominant discourse as sectarian, caste representatives; while those who variously defended brahmanism under the fig leaf of cultural nationalism are glorified as national leaders of vision and integrity (Mani 2005).

Jotirao Phule, and his wife Savitribai, were the first in modern India to declare war on brahmanic-casteist culture and religion. This Maharashtrian couple presented the first major anti-caste ideology and led a mass activism against the ascriptive norms and values. Their distinct brand of socio-cultural radicalism was based on uniting all the oppressed, whom they would call *stree-shudra-atishudra*. (Literally, *stree* means women, *shudra* is productive servile

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caste at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, and *atishudra* means ‘those beyond the shudras’, earlier despised as *outcastes*, or *untouchables*. In contemporary language, *shudras* and *atishudras* are other backward classes and dalits, respectively. But the Phules included in their notion of the oppressed, other marginalised groups as well such as *adivasis* and Muslims.)

After a century of elitist trivialisation, Mahatma Jotiba Phule (as he is popularly known) is belatedly recognised as the father of Indian social revolution. An organic thinker and system builder, he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (the Society of Truthseekers) in 1873, the first grassroots anti-caste organisation, and wrote many subversive books, including the famous *Ghulamgiri* (Slavery), a manifesto of sorts against the caste-brahmanic culture. His critique of the whole structure of hierarchy and oppression; his delineation of knowledge-power nexus; his deconstruction of brahmanic myth-history and attempts to replace it with an alternative reading of the past and present; his subversion of brahmanic religion and scriptures; his highly gendered view of women’s oppression and symbiosis between caste and patriarchy; his superb exposure of the emergent Hindu-brahmanic nationalism as an extension of obscurantist, self-strengthening movement of the caste elites; and above all, his life-long campaigns for democratisation of education, have been highlighted in some scholarly and popular writings (Keer 1964; Omvedt 1976; O’ Hanlon 1985; Chakravarti 1998; Mani 2005).

Savitribai Phule (1831-97), struggled and suffered with her revolutionary husband in an equal measure, but remains obscured due to casteist and sexist negligence. Apart from

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her identity as Jotirao Phule's wife, she is little known even in academia. Modern India's first woman teacher, a radical exponent of mass and female education, a champion of women's liberation, a pioneer of engaged poetry, a courageous mass leader who took on the forces of caste and patriarchy certainly had her independent identity and contribution. It is indeed a measure of the ruthlessness of elite-controlled knowledge-production that a figure as important as Savitribai Phule fails to find any mention in the history of modern India. This is not to deny the works by Marathi authors such as M.G. Mali, G.B. Sardar, Hari Narke, and Phulwantabai Zodge who have attempted to highlight her outstanding public life and contribution. Her life and struggle, however, deserves to be appreciated by a wider spectrum, and made known to non-Marathi people as well. This collection of write-ups is a modest attempt in that direction.

Before underlining the significance of her struggle, let us touch upon the uniquely beautiful relationship that the Phule couple shared with each other. What made their match unparalleled, was their total identification with each other, even in public life. She was still a teenager when she started involving herself in educational activities with her husband—playing an equally important role in founding and running schools for women and dalits—in the face of opposition from the orthodoxy whose power and authority she challenged. Savitri was only 18 and Jotirao was 22 years old when they were maligned, ostracised, and finally turned out of their own home by Joti's father who feared a high caste backlash for educating dalits and women, traditionally debarred under the brahmanic scheme from the right to

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education. Just imagine, two young people in love taking on the home and the world not for their romance but for liberating the shackled and the crushed—with a majestic belief that every woman, every child and every man has a right, a divine right, a natural right, to get educated and remake their life. What is more remarkable, they kept alive this revolutionary spirit throughout their lives, setting a benchmark in social and political engagement that has few parallels anywhere.

To Savitribai and Jotirao, the idea of justice and fairness, of equality between man and woman seems to have been instinctive. Perhaps, it was more so in the case of Savitribai as she suffered more as a woman. She never needed convincing for the need of an inclusive and compassionate world. She had her convictions already from the start—straight and clear. Does that make her less revolutionary than the latter-day privileged radicals and feminists who have better mastered the dialectics and duality of the human world but struggle to enact their subversive intellectual constructs in their own lives, let alone animating other people's lives?

Savitribai's life and struggle is an excellent answer to the heart-cry of Marx, a revolutionary thinker, "Philosophers have only understood the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." She did not understand the world in different ways, she understood it in one simple way—the necessity and possibility of making it more humane, more inclusive, more compassionate. What makes her important is that she lived up to this simple understanding in a magnificent way.

Savitribai's role in the anti-caste and women's struggle is

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unique. She emerges as the only woman leader among all social movements in nineteenth century India who linked patriarchy with caste. The nineteenth century is celebrated in history textbooks as the century of glorious socio-cultural regeneration led by an array of luminaries such as Rammohun Roy, Dayananda, and Vivekananda. What is not stated is the fact that the Indian Renaissance, confined to the upper echelons of society, was closely intertwined with the hegemonic neo-brahmanic Hinduism and the self-strengthening cultural nationalism. Savitribai Phule, on the other hand, was in the forefront of a socio-cultural struggle that challenged the tendency to focus only on higher social groups—brahman and allied castes. She encouraged a reversal of traditional subservient roles of women and depressed castes.

Apart from setting up the first ever school for women in India, Savitribai started a women's association called *Mahila Seva Mandal* as early as 1852. The association worked for raising women's consciousness about their human rights and other social issues. Being a woman, she easily recognised the double downtroddenness of most women as she saw the gender question in relation to caste and brahmanic patriarchy. She engaged herself at various levels to address women-specific problems. She campaigned against victimisation of widows. She advocated and encouraged widow remarriage. She canvassed against infanticide of 'illegitimate' children. She opened a home to rehabilitate such children. Her own home became a sanctuary for deserted women and orphaned children. She went on to organise a successful barbers' strike against the prevailing practice of shaving of widows' heads. She did all this taking

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grave personal risks. Many of these misogynistic practices have now receded in the background. But in her time, they tormented and destroyed countless women. Maligned, humiliated, and attacked for challenging the anti-women practices, Savitribai's struggle encouraged and inspired a whole generation of outstanding campaigners for gender justice in Maharashtra—Dr. Anandi Bai Gopal Joshi, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Ramabai Ranade, and many others have been inspired by her efforts.

Few people know that Savitribai Phule was a trailblazing poet of modern Marathi and an intensely committed writer. Her poetry and her letters to Jotirao, which are included in this collection, bring out her sensitive and revolutionary mind. She was also an able orator who thought it worthwhile to publish two collections of her own important speeches. She also collected, edited, and published speeches of Jotiba Phule. Caste and patriarchy have been the prime targets of her intellectual engagement. Above all, her writings give the impression of an ignited mind that wanted to kindle a similar spirit in other people's lives. She was an ardent advocate of modern education and the English language. "Learn English to annihilate caste" was a common refrain in some of her poems.

Savitribai Phule was a top leader of the Satyashodhak Samaj. She looked after its day-to-day functioning. She headed the women's wing of the Samaj. She led the Satyashodhak volunteers in many social campaigns and engagements. After Mahatma Phule's death, she assumed the leadership of the Samaj on the request of many Satyashodhaks who reposed their faith in her for her integrity, commitment, and long involvement in social

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activism. She also presided over the 1893 session of the Samaj. She led the Samaj from the front during the famine and the plague epidemic of 1896-7.

A unique spiritual vision sustained and animated Savitribai's life and struggle. A deeply devout and compassionate person, she drew inspiration and strength from the benevolence of a higher power. Her belief in a higher power, however, led her to wage a war against discriminatory brahmanic gods. She despised caste-obsessed brahmanic religion and its rituals, but she was a great admirer of many moral and ennobling tenets of other religions, especially Christianity. At the heart of her religiosity was compassion and a sacred morality that bound the individual with society. Like Jotiba Phule, she appreciated the power of culture and religion in the politics of transformation. Institutionalised religions, especially the caste-brahmanic Hinduism, have long been the target of social revolutionaries. But the tendency among many radical secularists to dismiss all religio-spiritual experiences as hoax, is pre-posterous. Even Marx was not as dismissive of religion as he is generally made out to be. This becomes clear when we read him carefully. As he writes in *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the people." In other words, religion is not unreal for the people. The important thing is, the use or abuse of religion. While most institutionalised religions have tended to align with the powers that be, thus going along the oppressive status quo, there have been other traditions where

religio-spiritual greats have invoked God and religion to build an exploitation-free world. Great medieval saints and poets such as Kabir, Raidas, and Tukaram would employ religious idioms to attack the oppressive political and religious authority. In their hands, religion became a weapon of the oppressed. On the other hand, Tulsidas, the author of *Rama-Charita-Manas*, did the opposite—he used religion in a most blatant manner to bolster caste and brahmanism (Mani 2005). There is a world of difference between a Kabir and a Tulsidas. Unlike many atheist radicals, Savitribai and Jotiba Phule were sensitive to the power and hold of religion on people's imagination. They saw real religion beyond caste and brahmanism, and strived to build an emancipatory religion. Phule's *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (the Religion of Universal Truth), as the very name suggests, was an attempt to build such an inclusive and emancipatory religion.

At the centre of Savitribai Phule's struggle was material and socio-spiritual liberation of the oppressed. It is a measure of her greatness that she lived up to this ideal more in her deeds than in her words. Anyone who is familiar with her life knows that she cared for others' children like her own, and she was particularly fond of the weak and the abandoned. She died while she was nursing a plague-affected child—she got infected while serving the affected people. In her life and her death, she embodied the noble and the sublime. Not grandiloquent words and great ideals in abstract, but her day-to-day public life, her suffering with the suffering people makes her majestic.

The revolutionary task that Savitribai Phule took, and endeavoured to accomplish—still remains a challenge for all believers in social democracy. The overall atmosphere, the

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times have changed dramatically, but a large majority of people in India still remain in economic, social, and cultural subjugation despite the claim of ‘deepening democracy.’ Her glorious struggle and public life is forgotten, let alone taken forward by most legislators, ministers, chief ministers and even from those who belong to the dalit-OBC background and dominate the Indian Parliament and state legislatures today. Having seen through the game of upper caste politicians, the toiling castes and communities are now turning to their own caste people to lead them. While this is step ahead in the right direction, their own representatives are turning out to be upper caste clones who work hand-in-glove with exploitative and corrupt forces. Willing only to cling to their powerful chairs and shamelessly willing to get co-opted and corrupted in the brahmanic caste culture, most dalit-OBC legislators and ministers are proving to be the worst enemies of their own caste people. Such things are taking place because the poor and the marginalised fail to rally round a united struggle for an alternative politics and a new society where everyone gets a measure of education and other basic minimums of life for which people like Savitribai Phule struggled for her entire life. It is here that the legacy of Savitribai Phule shines through, reminding us of our responsibility, giving us hope for a socio-cultural turnaround, and renewed efforts to turn this hope into a reality.



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CYNTHIA STEPHEN

The story of the continuing struggle for modernity and education for Indian women and the caste-oppressed, cannot be narrated without mentioning the role of Savitribai Phule, the wife of the social revolutionary Mahatma Jotirao Phule. Ten years before the birth of the celebrated Pandita Ramabai—the pioneering woman scholar, writer, social worker and path-breaking campaigner for women’s rights—Savitribai Phule, a woman from the *shudra* community, had earned for herself the distinction of being the first woman teacher in the country. During her long and illustrious public life, she also published four books, including two volumes of poetry, headed the Satyashodak Samaj after Mahatma Phule passed away, and broke new ground in socio-cultural creativity.

The Phules lived in Maharashtra at a time, when the closely enmeshed religious, political and social structures were under the control of brahmanical and caste-feudal forces. As Phule has stressed in many of his writings, the highly restrictive caste structures of society subjugated the

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toiling castes and communities, exploiting their labour, ignorance and religious fervour. The condition of women of all castes and classes was even worse. They were devalued as individuals and treated as chattels, providing domestic, economic and sexual labour in their family setting. There was no public role for them.

That Phule himself was educated is a miracle, since he was from a *shudra* caste and education was still a distant dream for *shudras* and *atishudras*. The young Phule's intelligence and eagerness to study had impressed two of his neighbours, one a Muslim teacher and the other a Christian, who encouraged his father to put him in a school where he performed very well. Meanwhile, he was married to Savitribai, even before he turned 13. The next year he was admitted to the Scottish Mission School in Pune. This exposed him to an English education and he read Thomas Paine's famous book *The Rights of Man*. The book made a powerful impact on him. He was also inspired by the work of Christian missionaries in India, by Shivaji, Martin Luther, and George Washington. He had a friend, Sadashiv Govande, who along with Walvekar, another friend, became the core team to work on a number of innovative ideas for social change. At a very young age, Jotirao had revolutionary thoughts about education, especially of women. He insisted upon Savitribai taking time off from her household duties to read and write; he became her first teacher.

The Phule couple had to face stiff opposition for their educational activities, especially promotion of women's education. According to the tradition, justified by many brahmanical texts, women were not to receive education, because it was believed "they would start writing letters to

all. The food her husband ate would turn to worms and he would die an untimely death.” But Phule was not in thrall of such misogynistic superstitions. He had started dreaming of freeing people from brahmanical patriarchy and caste enslavement. To this end, he began to work on several fronts. He published the first challenging critiques of brahmanical religion, campaigned for mass education, and most important of all, stressed the need for the oppressed people of India—*stree*, *shudra* and *atishudra*—to come together to smash slavery. For this, he founded a society called the Satyashodak Samaj. He was convinced that the existing reform movements within Hinduism were insufficient to bring any radical change. He formulated a belief in a compassionate Creator who was interested in the liberation of all human beings, irrespective of caste, class and gender. His religious vision was finally propounded as the *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, or the Universal Religion of Truth.

Phule’s dearest dream was to see that the women of India would be able to enjoy their full human rights. And what better way to achieve this than to empower them through education? He told his friend Sadashiv Govande, “The Lord was pleased to excite in me a desire to better their condition through means of education. Female schools are more necessary than male ones.”

Savitribai was Jotirao Phule’s first, and most important ally in the fulfillment of this vision. She stood like a rock by his side in this mission. Some schools for girls had already been started in India by the Christian missionaries in cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Nasik, Amhednagar and Surat. The girls who went to these schools were usually Christians, orphans or from low castes and poor families. But the fact

was that very few girls attended these schools because they were run by the alien missionaries. There were no government or private schools for girls run by Indians.

The Phule couple decided to start schools for girls, especially from the *shudra* and *atishudra* community so that parents of girls could send their daughters without bothering much. But there were no women teachers—all the women teachers were Christians or missionaries. In 1846-7, Savitribai with another woman, Fatima Sheikh, studied in a formal school in Ahmednagar and did quite well. So, Phule decided that Savitribai and Fatima would train as teachers and run the school.

As a teacher

A building was found in Pune to house the school which started in 1848, with nine students and Savitribai as its headmistress. Sadashiv Govande sent books from Ahmednagar. It functioned for about six months and then had to be closed down. Another building was found and the school reopened a few months later. The young couple faced severe opposition from almost all sections. Savitribai was subject to intense harassment everyday as she walked to school. Stones, mud and dirt were flung at her as she passed. She was often abused by groups of men with orthodox beliefs who opposed education for women. She braved this onslaught for many weeks. Her response was, “God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May God bless you!” But later, fed up with the constant harassment and vicious opposition she almost gave up. But Phule gave her hope, love and encouragement. She went to school wearing an old sari, and

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carried an extra sari with her to change into after she reached the school. Finally, the pressure on her eased when she was compelled to slap one of her tormentors on the street, after which she was left alone. Later, a peon was employed to escort her to and from the school.

Once the opponents of female education realized that the Phule couple would not easily give in, they stepped up their opposition. Intense pressure was brought by the brahmans on Phule's father, Govindrao, to convince him that his son was on the wrong track, that what he was doing was against the *Dharma*. Finally, things came to a head when Phule's father told him to leave home in 1849. Savitri preferred to stay by her husband's side, braving the opposition and difficulties, and encouraging Phule to continue their educational work.

By now, their educational initiative had won some support. Necessities like books were supplied through well wishers; a bigger house, owned by a Muslim, was found for a second school which was started in 1851. Moro Vithal Walvekar and Deorao Thosar assisted the school. Major Candy, an educationist of Pune, sent books. Jotirao worked here without any salary and later Savitribai was put in charge. The school committee, in a report, noted, "The state of the school funds has compelled the committee to appoint teachers on small salaries, who soon give up when they find better appointment...Savitribai, the school headmistress, has nobly volunteered to devote herself to the improvement of female education without remuneration. We hope that as knowledge advances, the people of this country will be awakened to the advantages of female education and will

cordially assist in all such plans calculated to improve the conditions of those girls.”

On November 16, 1852, the education department of the government organised a public felicitation of the Phule couple, where they were honoured with shawls. In his acceptance speech, Phule declared that he had acted in conformity with the dictates of his conscience and above all, the will of God.

On February 12, 1853, the school was publicly examined. The report of the event states: “The prejudice against teaching girls to read and write began to give way...the good conduct and honesty of the peons in conveying the girls to and from school and parental treatment and indulgent attention of the teachers made the girls love the schools and literally run to them with alacrity and joy.”

That Savitribai had a remarkable influence on her students can be gauged from the fact that an eleven-year old dalit student of hers, Muktabai, wrote a remarkable essay which was published in the paper *Dyanodaya*, in the year 1855. In her essay, Muktabai poignantly describes the wretchedness of the so-called untouchables and lambastes the brahmanical religion and culture for degrading and dehumanising her people.

As a writer and thinker

The year 1854 was important as Savitribai published her collection of poems, called *Kabya Phule* (Poetry's Blossoms). Her poetry, the first of its kind, is a historical document of the time. She consciously chose the traditional forms like

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abhang, often called a folk form. Her language is simple and effective. While some of her poems are basically nature poems, in others she engages with the themes of education and caste system, exhorting people to throw away slavery. No wonder, she is regarded as the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry.

Another collection of Savitri's, *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (The Ocean of Pure Gems) was published in 1891. It is a biography, in verse, of Phule. Phule had developed a devastating critique of the brahman interpretation of Marathi history in the ancient and medieval periods. He portrayed the Peshwa rulers, later overthrown by the British, as decadent and oppressive, and Savitribai reiterates those themes in her biography.

In addition to these two books, Savitribai edited for publication, four of Jotiba's speeches on Indian History. A few of her own speeches were published in 1892. Savitribai's correspondence is also remarkable because they give us an insight into her life and into women's experiences of the time.

Savitribai said, "Work hard, study well, and do good." She constantly underscored the importance of education and physical work for knowledge and prosperity. She felt that women must receive an education as they were in no way inferior to men; they were not the slaves of men.

In her essay *Karz* (Debt), she condemned the idea of celebrating festivals by borrowing money and thus being burdened by heavy debts. She realised that the poor find themselves helpless and unable to change the realities of their lives, either accepted blind faith or got trapped in

different ways. She also wrote on addiction, explaining how it ruined the lives of the addicted and their families – themes that are still relevant in the 21st century.

As wife

Savitribai internalised the vision and philosophy of Phule, and was an ardent supporter of his work. When Phule was publically humiliated for participating—because he was a ‘polluting’ *shudra*—in the marriage procession of a brahman friend, he rushed home and shared the pain and shame he felt with his father, who however, accepted the mainstream practice of caste discrimination, and tried to console him saying it was ordained in the scriptures. But surely Savitri understood his pain and gave him her love and constant encouragement in his fight against the social slavery. She showed by her actions and by the effort she made to study, work and cooperate with him in all his activities, that she was truly his soul-mate. They inspired each other to make things better.

The Phule couple shared a very close and loving bond. They had mutual love, respect, loyalty, and commitment to their common life-work. But they had no child of their own. Phule came under pressure to marry again so that he may have offspring, but his response shows the rare commitment and respect he bore for his life-partner, as well as ideal marriage relationship: “If a pair has no child, it would be unkind to charge a woman with barrenness. It might be the husband who was unproductive. In that case if the woman went in for a second husband how would her husband take

it? Would he not feel insulted and humiliated? It is a cruel practice for a man to marry a second time because he had no issues from his wife.” He lived up to this thinking.

Perhaps as a result of their childless state, the couple showed a sensitivity that was totally lacking in the society of the time, to the way women and children were treated. In 1863, the couple started an orphanage to take in orphaned children. Savitri’s maternal instincts came to the fore. “Savitribai looked unflinchingly after the children in the orphanage, as if she were their mother. She had no child [of her own] but with her kind and generous disposition she tenderly and lovingly cherished the infants. She invited all the neighbouring children to dinner often. She was happiest and smiled her sweetest when she was left among children,” notes Dhananjay Keer in his biography of Phule.

Importantly, the Phule couple adopted a child, the son of a brahman widow in 1874. They had rescued a young brahman woman who was going to commit suicide because she was pregnant. They took the woman into their home and promised to adopt the child when it was born. The boy Yashwant grew up as their son, and later became a doctor.

As a social revolutionary

Jotiba and Savitri gained notoriety for their revolutionary activities among those with entrenched vested interests, but the poor and the oppressed took them to their hearts.

Their work rattled the religious and political elites of the day. Keer, documents the incident of the assassination attempt made on Phule. One night, two intruders—a *mang* (dalit) and a *kumbhar* (potter), carrying swords, crept into

the bedroom of the couple as they slept. Phule, a well-built and strong young man, awoke and got up. Savitribai also woke up, raised the wick of the lamp that burnt dimly in the room for light, and stood resolutely by his side. Phule asked them why they were there. They told him that they were there to take his life. He asked, "Why? What have I done to harm you?" The men replied: "None, but we have been hired to kill you by some of your enemies." "For what crime am I being given this sentence?" he asked. "My wife and I have dedicated our lives for the betterment of the poor and the oppressed. If, by my death you are going to have some benefit, please do so." "They promised to pay us one thousand rupees each" was the reply. "Then, you must certainly take my life", he said, "because one thousand rupees is a large sum and two poor families will benefit from my death". By this time the men realized that Phule was no ordinary individual. They fell at his feet and begged his pardon. They also asked him for permission to mete out the same treatment to the ones who had hired them to kill him. He asked them to forgive them and to join him in his work, which they did, and became his staunchest supporters. All through the encounter, Savitri firmly stood by Jotiba's side, keeping her composure.

The outstanding role of the Phules in women's empowerment, especially widow's welfare, has rightly been underscored by many historians. Child marriages were the norm in the society, and often very young girls and adolescents became widows due to the untimely death of their husband. The age of the widow was never taken into account and the tradition of treating a widow as a ritually impure, social outcaste, non-person who existed on the edge

of society; was rigidly practiced. This caused her exploitation by the males of the family and she was defenceless against her exploitation, but faced further disgrace if she happened to become pregnant as a result of the illicit relationships she may have been forced into. There was a case where a widow was arrested for killing her illegitimate offspring. This caused the Phule couple to set up a home for the welfare of unwed mothers and their offspring, in 1853, even as their educational activities continued. Characteristically, Phule advertised the service by putting up pamphlets with provocatively-worded announcements right in the brahman section of the town, thus angering his detractors further. But as a result the lives of several children were saved, and the women were given a safe place to stay, free of the fear of being exploited. Savitribai proved to be a caring mother to the women who found refuge in the home.

She is also known to have taken the lead in organising the boycott by the barbers against shaving the heads of widows in the 1860s.

Phule founded the Satyashodak Samaj as a socio-spiritual movement on September 24, 1873. Phule was convinced that the existing reform movements within Hinduism—the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, and the Arya Samaj—continued to be the preserve of brahmanism and ritualism. While the focus of the first was Brahma, the second focused on prayer, and the Aryan identity was the focus of the third. In the case of Phule, the focus was Truth—universal and emancipatory. The objective of the Samaj was “to redeem *shudras* and *atishudras* from the influence of the brahmanical scriptures, teach them their

human rights and liberate them from mental and religious slavery.” The Samaj declared: “All men are Children of God. There is no need for an intermediary or a priest to worship God.” Many of the supporters and members of the Samaj were persecuted and lost government jobs, because brahmans were their superiors—the secretary of the Samaj was given a punishment transfer to Mahabaleshwar!

Savitri headed the women’s unit of the Satyashodak Samaj. The Samaj took the lead in breaking the priestly hold over society by organizing a marriage without any role for the brahman priest. On December 25, 1873, they organised a marriage between a young widower and the daughter of a woman who was a close friend of Savitribai. Though there was some opposition, the wedding went ahead. A second wedding was also arranged a few months later. This time, the brahmans organised an opposition well in advance, but Phule proved to be more than their equal. Even though the bridegroom, Sasane, almost backed out, Phule organised police protection through a friend who was a lawyer, and another prominent person, and the wedding went ahead as planned.

The significance of these events is hard to imagine in the 21st century. But these were the first instances, probably in centuries, when a Hindu wedding was conducted without the mediation of a brahman and without a brahman priest officiating at the ceremony. It was probably the first time that the law was pressed into the defence of such a matrimonial ceremony, in effect making it one of the first civil weddings between Indians in the country.

A FORGOTTEN LIBERATOR

In the 1870s, the Phules were actively involved in famine relief. They were instrumental in starting 52 boarding schools for the welfare of the children orphaned in the famines.

Mahatma Phule passed away on November 28, 1890. Even at the funeral, Savitribai showed her gritty character. Her adopted son, Yashwant, raised an objection to Phule's cousin carrying out the last rites, as this duty devolved on the heir to the property. Hence she stepped forward to light the pyre! This perhaps, was one of the very rare instances in the history of India, where the wife lit the funeral pyre of the husband.

Savitribai took over the Satyashodak Samaj after the death of her husband. She presided over the meeting of the Samaj in 1893 in Saswad. In the famine of 1896, Savitribai again worked tirelessly, and successfully lobbied the government to undertake relief measures. In 1897, an epidemic swept Pune. Savitribai was engaged personally in the relief effort during this tragedy as well. This time, she was afflicted by plague, and died on March 10, 1897. Her son Yashwant officiated at her funeral.

The life that inspires

Savitribai was a major figure of her time. An able and committed companion to her husband, she was a revolutionary leader in her own right. Despite tremendous odds, she rose to become a productive, inspiring and capable teacher, leader, thinker and writer.

She was probably one of the first published women in modern India, and was able to develop her own voice and

agency at a time when women of all classes were still treated as less than human, with little to hope for, except to be married as children themselves, bear more children, and live a life of servitude to their husbands, and after he died, to other male relatives.

The fact that the Phule couple exercised the still highly unusual option of adopting the son of a brahman widow and raising him as their own son, shows their rare integrity of principle and practice—at one stroke challenging several notions of purity, descent, morality. In so doing, they also elevated the man-woman relationship to one of equality and mutual respect.

Her act, of choosing to light her husband's funeral pyre, which would still be considered audacious, must have sent shock waves across the land! This one act speaks volumes of her self-confidence and independence, proving that she was not a conventional Indian *pativrata* (devoted wife) following in her husband's footsteps. Such facts have been kept hidden from public knowledge, whereas the brahman male reformists' highly ambiguous and half-hearted efforts for women's upliftment continue to be hailed as the most glorious chapter of the 19th century India.

The truly liberating moments for Indian women happened in and through the life of Savitribai, who chose to walk tall, in step with her husband, ahead of her time by centuries. The historic disadvantages of caste, class and gender failed to keep her down in the 19th century.



A TEACHER AND A LEADER

GAIL OMVEDT

The year was 1851, the occasion: the opening of the first school for girls—of all castes—in Pune. A young woman, veil over her head, is hurrying to teach. From nearby, the orthodox brahman women curse: *What is she doing, why is this happening? This is an insult to our sex and our religion!*

And they throw dung at her.

Undaunted, Savitribai, wife of Jotiba, hurries on. She has a greater aim in front of her. The giving of knowledge to those who have been deprived for centuries and centuries, girls, especially low-caste girls. This is her aim in life now, encouraged by her husband, who has taken the unprecedented step of educating his wife so that she can in turn educate others—not only the family, but the community. For that she is ready to face anything, including the taunts and harassment of the orthodox.

The incident has become famous—though there are varying stories about it. In one version, most recently seen on the internet, it is a group of men who followed her,

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occasionally even throwing stones. According to this account, Savitribai was finally advised by her husband to wear her old sari while walking to the school, change into a new one before taking classes, and change into the old one while returning home.

Savitribai was born in a farming family in Naigaon, western Maharashtra, in 1831, and married to Jotirao, as was the custom then, as a young girl only nine years old. She became his constant companion throughout life. He was the one who encouraged her to learn, in spite of opposition from his own family, and together they left the joint household and began a separate life of struggle together. The *mangalashataka* or wedding song that Jotirao wrote must have been inspired by her:

Groom: Maintain the customs of your family according to the laws of God,
Truth is supreme over all, honour it;
Teach all the ignorant equally, give them knowledge:
I take you in marriage with love, seeing all your deeds
Shubhamangala savadhan.

Bride: Even though you give respect daily, and your conduct is satisfactory, All us women are exploited, how will you take me?
We know the experience of freedom and have become self-respecting,
For that will you give rights to women? Take an oath—Shubhamangala savadhan.

Groom: I will fight to win these rights for all women without counting the cost
I honour all women as sisters and you as the only love

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For fear of my duty I will take care of you: Shubhamangala savadhan.

Bride: With brotherhood all around, I take you as my husband,
I will never break my vow to you and always do my duty,
Laying aside all burdens let us struggle for the welfare of the
people,
Holding your hand I vow, before all now, Shubhamangala
savadhan.

The blessing of the guardians:

Honour always your gratitude to your mother and father,
And keep love for your friends,
Give support to the old, the crippled and children, teach them
knowledge,
Joyfully throw flowers everywhere and now clap your hands,
Shubhamangala savadhan.

And so, she worked with Jotirao when he started a series of five schools in 1849, with the school for girls as the climax, and went for training with a young Muslim woman, Fatima Sheikh. The girls in the school belonged to different castes, and one essay by a young dalit (*Matanga* caste) girl remains famous. In it, inspired by what she had learned, she wrote about the benefits of education that British rule had made possible:

Formerly, we were buried alive in the foundations of buildings... we were not allowed to read and write... God has bestowed on us the rule of the British and our grievances are redressed. Nobody harasses us now. Nobody hangs us. Nobody buries us alive. Our progeny can live now. We can wear clothes, can put cloth around

A TEACHER AND A LEADER

our body. Everybody is at liberty to live according to his means. No bars, no taboos, no restriction. Even the bazaar at the Gultekadi is open to us.

In 1852, Savitribai and Jotirao were both, felicitated by the government for their work in education.

She took part boldly in all the social revolutionary activities, throwing open her own well to untouchables in 1868, serving as the president of the Satyashodhak Samaj and carrying on its work even after her husband's death, helping in the home for orphans of widows founded by Jotiba and with him adopting a baby, son of a Brahman widow, naming him Yashwant and bringing him up as her own son.

When she died it was in social service. She was helping the victims of plague in the mid 1890s, when she organized camps for poor children. It is said that she used to feed two thousand children every day during the epidemic. By a strange irony, she herself was struck by the disease while nursing a sick child and died on 10 March, 1897.

It is not surprising, then, that she has become known as *Krantijyoti*—Savitribai Phule, the lamp of revolution.



THE WOMAN WHO MENTORED THE PHULES

PAMELA SARDAR

Jotirao Phule was just an infant, when his mother Chimnabai died. His grief-stricken father was worried about the little Joti. He decided to remain single and take care of the child but it was beyond him to play both father and mother to the little one. In his helplessness, he looked towards a cousin of his, Sagunabai, who was a child widow. This compassionate and intelligent woman came into Joti's life like a godsend and played the part of his mother and mentor. She spotted the extraordinary sensitivity and brilliance of the young Joti, and became deeply attached to him. A special and deep bond developed between them. A devout and supremely selfless person, she somehow knew in her heart of hearts that this boy was special, not for the family only but for the whole of society.

She had great expectations from her Joti. From very early days, she instilled in him ennobling human qualities through her words and deeds, and constantly encouraged him to read

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and write, and do something worthwhile for society—very unusual things, considering the social background and conservative thinking of his father Govindrao, who wanted Joti to carry on the family’s farming work. It was Sagunabai who insisted on, and succeeded in, enrolling Joti to a good school—a move that was being opposed by the society at large. And, when Govindrao thought of marrying his son, it was she who saw in Savitri an ideal match for Joti, and arranged their marriage. Sagunabai was very fond of Savitri as well, treating her like a dear daughter. She not only gave the young couple unconditional love and affection, but also steeled their resolve at crucial moments in their life in the face of great adversities. In her uniquely measured and dignified way, she mothered and mentored Joti and Savitri for the great revolutionary work that laid ahead.

In their turn, Joti and Savitri also bore unbounded love and gratitude for their *Aau-Maa* (aunt-mother), as they lovingly called her. They knew and appreciated her worth, and gratefully acknowledged her as the greatest and most ennobling influence in their life. Had there been no Sagunabai in their life, perhaps their life would have been very different—perhaps there would have been no Phule phenomenon, as we know it today.

Sagunabai Kshirsagar was born in village Dhankawadi near Naigaon in the district of Satara in Maharashtra. She was married early and soon became a widow. Compelled by circumstances to eke out her living, she took up a job as a domestic help in the house of a missionary, Mr. John, in Pune. Mr. John had some orphans in his house besides having his own children. A keen learner, Sagunabai, doubling

up as a baby-sitter in the missionary's house, picked up a smattering of English.

A whole new world opened up for Sagunabai in the missionary's house. Working among orphans deepened her understanding of human vulnerability and suffering. She realised the universal need for love and compassion. She developed into a sensitive, loving and caring person. Govindrao, during a visit to her place, requested her to take Joti under her care. She got permission from the missionary to take her nephew in. Govindrao's faith in her was not misplaced because she did bring up Joti as her own son, instilling in him human and moral values which she saw in abundance at the missionary's house.

Brought up in the missionary's house, Joti developed a fascination for the English language which was to later become a potent weapon in his hands to counter the brahmanical knowledge tyranny. Here, he also learnt the value of time, discipline, and the spirit of service to the needy and the suffering. The Christian devotion, prayer, and passion for humanitarian work made a powerful impact on the impressionable Joti. Sagunabai admired her employer, the missionary Mr. John, for his humane qualities and social work, and she wanted her Joti to become like him.

It was her utmost desire to make Joti an inspired person, committed to community service. She did everything she was capable of to nurture and encourage positive human values in him. Sagunabai also taught Joti the truth of human equality and the utter nonsense of the concept of caste. In her humble and simple way, she made Joti understand that there is only one God, and all people are made by this God—all people are His children. Her love and compassion

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for orphaned and distraught children sensitised Joti to the weak and the defenceless.

Sagunabai and Jotirao shared a strong bond of love and mutual admiration. Sagunabai's loving yet disciplined upbringing helped him to evolve into an emotionally sound person. The inspirational influence of Sagunabai on his life was apparent to anyone who knew them closely.

Sagunabai found a son and a daughter in Jotirao and his wife Savitri. She identified the strength of character and integrity in them and also the potential to become a source of inspiration and liberation for many. Joti's caste-bound father just wanted him to carry on the family business of selling flowers and tilling their land, but Sagunabai had a very different dream for him. She knew that Joti was a promising child, all he needed was good schooling. She was fortunate to be able to admit him to a good missionary school, courtesy Mr. John. But one brahman clerk in Govindrao's shop poisoned his mind against Joti's English education—"Your son would be of no use for business, and more important, our Hindu *Dharma* does not allow a *shudra* to get education. An educated *shudra* and his whole clan suffer in hell for seven generations!" The gullible Govindrao took Joti out of the school and put him to work on the family farm. Sagunabai was sad and distraught for Joti. But she was not one to give in so easily. She met two influential men, Mr. Leggit, an English officer and Gaffar Beg, a respected Muslim scholar, who persuaded Govindrao to send Joti back to the school. Thus, Joti was readmitted to the school. Sagunabai's foresight and timely intervention made it possible.

As Joti learned and got educated he passed his learning

on to both Savitri and Sagunabai, who later became school teachers and helped liberate hundreds of girls from ignorance and illiteracy. Because of them the education of Indian women, especially from the poor and oppressed segments of Indian society, began.

Significantly, Sagunabai was also a forerunner of the Phules' educational activities. She had started a school in the Maharwada (the untouchable's colony) in 1846. But within a few months, the school had to be closed down due to the vicious opposition of some brahmans who saw it as a conspiracy of the missionaries to convert all *mahars* into Christians. The leader of *mahar* community was brainwashed, and the school was forcibly shut down. Sensing the sinister design of the brahmans, the young Phule came to the fore and organised a huge public meeting in Pune on December 25, 1846 on the issue. In an eloquent and stirring speech, Phule stressed the need to understand the brahmanical conspiracy to keep the people ignorant and illiterate. He underscored the necessity of rewriting history from the people's perspective, and declared his intention to start schools for girls of all castes, come what may. Mr. Bhide, who was present at the meeting, offered his big house for the first girls' school in the locality of brahmans because *mahars* were not ready for it yet. Phule accepted the offer and used Bhide's house for the first girls' school that was established in Pune.

Thus, the lead taken by Sagunabai came to fruition. Subsequently, Jotirao and Savitribai went on to establish several schools in Pune and nearby areas. No one was happier than Sagunabai. She was so proud of her Joti and Savitri.

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As the vested interests stepped up opposition against their educational activities, Sagunabai, Savitri and Joti would often discuss the long-drawn brahmanical conspiracy against the *stree-shudra-atishudra*. Joti's firsthand experience of caste discrimination was steeling his resolve to wage a full-blooded struggle against caste and brahmanism. Whenever Joti came up with some striking ideas for social transformation, Sagunabai would applaud and encourage him. She would bless the couple for taking up the historic responsibility. She would become emotional. She would offer prayers for them.

Her deep religiosity combined with a rare social sensitivity deeply influenced the Phules, firming their commitment for a socio-cultural revolution.

No wonder, Savitribai later wrote a gushing poem in her verse collection, *Bawan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar*, in the praise of her dear *Aau*:

*Our Aau so hard working, so loving, so merciful,
Even the deep sea looks shallow before her,
Even the high sky appears short before her.
Aau came to our home, and endured so much pain for us.
She is the goddess of our education.
We have placed her in our heart.*

Joti was equally generous in his praise for *Aau*. Dedicating his book *Nirmikacha Shodh* (The Search for the Creator) to *Aau Maa*, Phule writes:

*The Endowment of Truth, Sagunabai, you brought me up
humane and humble. You taught me how to love other's children.
With great appreciation, I learned it from you. I dedicate this
book to you.*

A FORGOTTEN LIBERATOR

Sagunabai Kshirsagar, the mother and mentor of the Phules, died on July 6, 1854. Her legacy now lies in the fruit of the Phule phenomenon; their pioneering educational work, their grit in the face of adversity and the thousands of *stree-shudra-atishudra* lives transformed by their resolve, labour and service.



LOVE LETTERS UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Savitri's Three Letters to Jotiba

*Translated from the original Marathi with
an introduction*

SUNIL SARDAR

We are reproducing here the English translation of three important letters—(originally in Marathi and published in MG Mali's edition of her collected works, *Savitribai Phule Samagra Wangmaya*)—that Savitribai wrote to her husband Jotiba during a span of 20 years. The letters are significant for a number of reasons. Brimming with the boundless love of a wife for her husband, though not in a familiar way, the letters are a moving testimony of how Savitribai's spousal love was inseparable from a great commitment for a wider cause—a social redemption where even the most desolate segments of society would attain full human dignity and freedom. This dream and indomitable will for a new and liberated society—free from the fetters of ignorance, bigotry, deprivation, and hunger—was the tenacious thread that bonded the couple completely, fusing

their private and public life into one, a rare example of total identification with the greater common good. These letters also implicitly underline the great emotional support Savitri provided to her revolutionary and restive husband. When almost the whole of nineteenth century dominant Maharashtrian society was ranged against Phule's reconstructive radicalism, perhaps it was the supreme love—and joyous dedication—of his life-companion that emotionally sustained Phule in his unrelenting struggle against the reactionary and oppressive forces. Savitribai emerges from these letters as an equal and able companion of Jotiba Phule in the liberation struggle of the oppressed.

The subject of the first letter, written in 1856, is education and its emancipatory role in a society where learning had for centuries been the monopoly of the brahmans who would employ it as an instrument to enslave, demoralize and oppress the toiling castes. Away at her parental home to recuperate from an illness, Savitri describes in the letter a conversation with her brother. She rebuts her brother's plea that she and Jotiba should submit to the customs of their caste and follow the dictates of the brahmans, eschewing any independent social roles. Savitribai strongly defends her social and educational activities in Pune where she taught girls, women, *mahars* and *mangs*. As she argues, "The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. It is the acquisition of knowledge that gives the brahmans their superior status. Learning and knowledge are glorious. One who acquires knowledge loses his lowly status and achieves the higher one."



LOVE LETTERS UNLIKE ANY OTHER

October 1856

*The Embodiment of Truth, My Lord Jotiba,
Savitri salutes you!*

After so many vicissitudes, now it seems my health has been fully restored. My brother worked so hard and nursed me so well in my sickness. His service and devotion shows how loving he really is! I will come to Pune as soon as I get perfectly well. Please do not worry about me. I know my absence causes Fatima so much trouble but I am sure she will understand and won't grumble.

As we were talking one day, my brother said, "You and your husband have rightly been excommunicated because both of you serve the untouchables (mahars and mangs). The untouchables are fallen people and by helping them you are bringing a bad name to our family. That is why, I tell you to behave according to the customs of our caste and obey the dictates of the brahmans." Mother was so disturbed by this brash talk of my brother. Though my brother is a good soul he is extremely narrow-minded and so he did not hesitate to bitterly criticize and reproach us. My mother did not reprimand him but tried instead to bring him to his senses, "God has given you a beautiful tongue but it is no good to misuse it so!" I defended our social work and tried to dispel his misgivings. I told him, "Brother, your mind is narrow, and the brahmans' teaching has made it worse. Animals like goats and cows are not untouchable for you, you lovingly touch them. You catch poisonous snakes on the day of the snake-festival and feed them milk. But you consider mahars and mangs, who are as human as you and I, untouchables. Can you give me any reason for this? When the brahmans perform their religious duties in their holy clothes, they consider you also impure and untouchable, they are afraid that your touch will pollute them. They don't treat you differently than mahars." When my brother heard this, he turned

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red in the face, but then he asked me, "Why do you teach those mahars and mangs? People abuse you because you teach the untouchables. I cannot bear it when people abuse and create trouble for you for doing that. I cannot tolerate such insults." I told him what the English had been doing for the people. I said, "The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. It is the acquisition of knowledge that gives the brahmans their superior status. Learning and knowledge are glorious. One who acquires knowledge loses his lower status and achieves the higher one. My husband is a god-like man. He is beyond comparison in this world, nobody can equal him. He thinks the untouchables must learn and attain freedom. He confronts the brahmans and fights with them for teaching the untouchables because he believes that they are human beings like others and they should live as dignified humans. For this they must be educated. I also teach them for the same reason. What is wrong with that? Yes, we both teach girls, women, mangs and mahars. The brahmans are upset because they believe this will create problems for them. That is why they oppose us and chant the mantra that it is against our religion. They revile and castigate us and poison the minds of even good people like you.

"You surely remember that the British Government had organised a function to honour my husband for his great work. His felicitation caused these vile people much heartburn. Let me tell you that my husband does not merely invoke God's name and do pilgrimages like you. He is actually doing God's own work. And I assist him in that. I enjoy doing this work. I get immeasurable joy by doing such service. Moreover, it also shows the heights and horizons to which a human being can reach out." Mother and brother were listening to me intently. My brother finally came around, repented what he had said and asked for forgiveness. Mother said, "Savitri, your tongue must be speaking God's own words. We are blessed by your words of wisdom." Such

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*appreciation from mother and brother gladdened my heart.
From this you can imagine that there are many idiots here, as in
Pune, who poison people's minds and spread canards against us.
But why should we fear them and leave this noble cause we have
undertaken? It would be better to engage with the work instead.
We shall overcome and success will be ours in the future. The
future belongs to us.*

What more could I write?

With humble regards,

Yours,

Savitri



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The second letter is about the violation of a great social taboo—a love affair between a brahman boy and an untouchable girl and how the enraged villagers are thirsting for their blood. Coming to know about it, Savitri intervenes and saves the lives of the lovers and sends them away to the safety and caring support of her husband, Jotiba. The letter shows, in a significant way, how Savitribai spontaneously comes to the rescue of the helpless lovers by supporting their inter-caste union. Such a gesture remains radical even today, especially in rural India, it was nothing less than revolutionary in the 1860s.

*29 August, 1868
Naigaon, Peta Khandala
Satara*

*The Embodiment of Truth, My Lord Jotiba,
Savitri salutes you!*

I received your letter. We are fine here. I will come by the fifth of next month. Do not worry on this count. Meanwhile, a strange thing happened here. The story goes like this. One Ganesh, a brahman, would go around villages, performing religious rites and telling people their fortunes. This was his bread and butter. Ganesh and a teenage girl named Sharja who is from the mahar (untouchable) community fell in love. She was six months pregnant when people came to know about this affair. The enraged people caught them, and paraded them through the village, threatening to bump them off.

I came to know about their murderous plan. I rushed to the spot and scared them away, pointing out the grave consequences

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of killing the lovers under the British law. They changed their mind after listening to me.

Sadubhau angrily said that the wily brahman boy and the untouchable girl should leave the village. Both the victims agreed to this. My intervention saved the couple who gratefully fell at my feet and started crying. Somehow I consoled and pacified them. Now I am sending both of them to you. What else to write?

Yours,

Savitri



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The last letter, written in 1877, is a heart-rending account of a famine that devastated western Maharashtra. People and animals were dying. Savitri and other Satyashodhak volunteers were doing their best to help out the famine-ravaged people. The letter brings out an intrepid Savitri leading a team of dedicated Satyashodhaks striving to defuse the internal dissension and riots caused by some moneylenders' dirty politics. She meets the District Collector and boldly tells him to do what is urgently required. The letter ends on a poignant note where Savitribai reiterates her total commitment to her husband's great humanitarian work. She terms liberating social work as godly, and assures Jotiba of her unfailing support for the mission with which she has identified herself.

20 April, 1877

Otur, Junner

*The Embodiment of Truth, My Lord Jotiba,
Savitri salutes you!*

The year 1876 has gone, but the famine has not—it stays in most horrendous form here. The people are dying. The animals are dying, falling on the ground. There is severe scarcity of food. No fodder for animals. The people are forced to leave their villages. Some are selling their children, their young girls, and leaving the villages. Rivers, brooks and tanks have completely dried up—no water to drink. Trees are dying—no leaves on trees. Barren land is cracked everywhere. The sun is scorching—blistering. The people crying for food and water are falling on the ground to die. Some are eating poisonous fruits, and drinking their own urine to quench their thirst. They cry for food and drink, and then they die.

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Our Satyashodhak volunteers have formed committees to provide food and other life-saving material to the people in need. They have formed relief squads.

Brother Kondaj and his wife Umabai are taking good care of me. Otur's Shastri, Ganapati Sakharan, Dumbare Patil, and others are planning to visit you. It would be better if you come from Satara to Otur and then go to Ahmednagar.

You may remember R.B. Krishnaji Pant and Laxman Shastri. They travelled with me to the affected area and gave some monetary help to the victims.

The moneylenders are viciously exploiting the situation. Bad things are taking place as a result of this famine. Riots are breaking out. The Collector heard of this and came to ease the situation. He deployed the white police officers, and tried to bring the situation under control. Fifty Satyashodhaks were rounded up. The Collector invited me for a talk. I asked the Collector why the good volunteers had been framed with false charges and arrested without any rhyme or reason. I asked him to release them immediately. The Collector was quite decent and unbiased. He shouted at the white soldiers, "Do the Patil farmers rob? Set them free." The Collector was moved by the people's plights. He immediately sent four bullock cartloads of (jowar) food.

You have started the benevolent and welfare work for the poor and the needy. I also want to carry my share of the responsibility. I assure you I will always help you. I wish the godly work will be helped by more people. I do not want to write more.

Yours,

Savitri



PIONEERING ENGAGED WRITING

Savitribai Phule's Poetry

Rendered from the original in Marathi

SUNIL SARDAR AND VICTOR PAUL

Though it is not well known, Savitribai Phule is one of the earliest poets of modern India. Her verse collection, *Kabya Phule*, published as early as 1854, is perhaps the first published work of poetry by any Indian in British India.

Savitribai Phule is the trailblazer of engaged poetry. She wrote to awaken the downtrodden to a new consciousness of human dignity, freedom and equality. She was also among the first to understand and underscore the importance of the English language as a vehicle of an emancipatory education. The following are some of the poems—translated from the original Marathi collected in MG Mali's collection, *Savitribai Phule Samagra Wangmaya*—which depict a range of her educational and social concerns.

A FORGOTTEN LIBERATOR

Go, Get Education

Be self-reliant, be industrious
Work—gather wisdom and riches.
All gets lost without knowledge
We become animals without wisdom.

Sit idle no more, go, get education
End misery of the oppressed and forsaken.

You've got a golden chance to learn
So learn and break the chains of caste.

Throw away the brahman's scriptures fast.

Rise to Learn and Act

Weak and oppressed! Rise my brother
Come out of living in slavery.

Manu-follower Peshwas are dead and gone
Manu's the one who barred us from education.

Givers of knowledge—the English have come
Learn, you've had no chance in a millennium.

We'll teach our children and ourselves learn
Receive knowledge, become wise to discern.

An upsurge of jealousy is in my soul
Crying out for knowledge to be whole.

PIONEERING ENGAGED WRITING

This festering wound, mark of caste
I'll blot out from my life at last.

In Baliraja's kingdom, let's beware
Our glorious mast, unfurl and flare.

Let all say, "Misery go and kingdom come!"

Awake, arise and educate
Smash traditions—liberate!

We'll come together and learn
Policy—righteousness—religion.

Slumber not but blow the trumpet
O brahman, dare not you upset.

Give a war cry, rise fast
Rise, to learn and act.

Mother English

Rule of Peshwa is gone
Mother English has come.

Forlorn and dark our hopelessness
Ominous fears of heaven and abyss.

In such a dismal time of ours
Come Mother English, this is your hour.

A FORGOTTEN LIBERATOR

Throw off the yoke of redundant belief
Break open the door, walk out in relief.

Learn to read and write, O my dear one
Opportune times! Mother English has come.

Manu's ways are evil and mean
Poor and depressed we have all been.

They've cheated, befooled, looted us all
They've gone with English Mother's footfall.

Brahman's rule is now in ashes
Under the English whips and lashes.

It is all for the good of the poor
Manu's dead at English Mother's door.

Knowledge is poor man's refuge and shade
It's akin to comfort mother-made.

In English rule we've found our joy
Bad days gone, Mother English ahoy!

English is the inheritance of none
Persian, Brahman, Yemeni or Hun.

We have true Indian blood in our veins

Cry out aloud! And shout!
Mother English is OUT!

English the Mother

English Language, our English Mother
With verve and zeal sets us yonder.

Mother English is not of a Mughal,
A Peshwa Brahman or the gullible.

Mother English imparts true wisdom
With love revives the oppressed one.

Mother English embraces the downtrodden
Caressing and bringing up those who are fallen.

Mother English breaks shackles of slavery
Replaces bestiality with the glory of humanity.



THE REVOLT OF A DALIT GIRL

An Essay By A Student of Phules' School

Translated from the original Marathi

BRAJ RANJAN MANI

Muktabai, a girl from the dalit community, studied at the school in Pune established by Savitribai and Jotiba Phule. The eleven-year-old Mukta wrote the following essay *Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi* ('About the grief of the *mangs* and *mahars*'—*mang* and *mahar* are two dalit castes in Maharashtra,) which was published in 1855 by *Dyanodaya*, an Ahmednagar-based journal of repute. It is carried in the *Mahatma Phule Gaurav Granth* (ed. Hari Narke, 2006, pp. 747-8), from which this historic document is translated here. Perhaps the earliest surviving piece of writing by a dalit woman, the essay presents a moving description of barbarities perpetrated against the untouchables, and goes on to tear into the sinister fabric of brahmanic culture and religion that sanctions such oppressions. The new education imparted at the Phules' school enabled the young girl to see through the selfish priestcraft and hollow wisdom of the

most sacred entity in the caste hierarchy. It enabled her to launch into a blistering broadside against the oppressive forces of caste and brahmanism, and proclaim, “Let that religion, where only one person is privileged and the rest deprived, vanish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to boast of such a [discriminatory] religion.” Muktabai’s essay is a great example of the Phules’ belief in the *potential explosiveness* of education. For the Phules, education was not merely alphabetical learning but a means of igniting the minds of the oppressed for desirable socio-cultural transformation. It was a means to gain an ability to discern the good from the bad, and acquire a critical understanding of the world. Education was at the centre of their movement for precisely this reason.



Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi

It humbles me to realise that God has filled the heart of an untouchable girl like me, considered to be even lower than an animal, with the pain and suffering of my people—the *mahars* and *mangs*. The Creator of all beings has put this in my heart and while invoking His name, I dare to pen this essay with the strength I have now received. The Creator is the one who created the *mangs*, the *mahars* and also the brahmans and He is the one, who is filling me with wisdom to write. He will bless my labour with a fruitful outcome.

If we attempt to refute, on the basis of the Vedas, the argument of these gluttonous brahmans, who hate us and

consider themselves vastly superior, they say that the Vedas are their own domain, their exclusive property. Now apparently, if the Vedas are only for the brahmans, they are obviously not for us.

If the Vedas belong only to the brahmans, then it is an open secret that we do not have the Book. We are without the Book—we are without any religion. If the Vedas are for the brahmans only, then we are not bound to act according to the Vedas. If merely looking at the Vedas can get us into grievous sins (as the brahmans claim), then would not following them be the height of foolishness? Muslims lead their life according to their Koran, English people follow their Bible and brahmans have their own Vedas. Because they all have their own good or bad religion that they follow, they are somewhat happier than us who are without any religion. Oh, God, please tell us, what is our religion? Teach us, O God, your true religion so that we all can lead our lives according to it. Let that religion, where only one person is privileged and the rest deprived, vanish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to boast of such a [discriminatory] religion.

These people drove us, the poor *mangs*, and *mahars*, away from our own lands, which they occupied to build large buildings. And that was not all. They would make the *mangs* and *mahars* drink oil mixed with red lead and buried our people in the foundations of their buildings, thus wiping out generation after generation of our poor people. The brahmans have degraded us so low; they consider people like us even lower than cows and buffaloes. Did they not consider us even lower than donkeys during the rule of Bajirao Peshwa? You beat a lame donkey, and his master retaliates.

THE REVOLT OF A DALIT GIRL

But who was there to object to the routine thrashing of *mahars* and *mangs*? Under Bajirao's rule, if any *mang* or *mahar* happened to pass in front of a gymnasium, they would cut off his head and play 'bat and ball' with their swords as bats and his head as a ball, on the grounds. When we were punished for even passing through their doors, where was the question of getting education, getting freedom to learn? When any *mang* or *mahar* would learn somehow to read and write, and if Bajirao came to know about this, he would say: education of a *mang* or *mahar* amounts to taking away a brahman's job. He used to say, "How dare they get educated? Do these untouchables expect the brahmans to hand over their official duties to them and move around with their shaving kits, shaving the heads of widows?" With such remarks he would punish them.

Secondly, were these brahmans satisfied with prohibiting us from learning? Not at all. Bajirao went to Kashi and died an ignominious death there. But the *mahars* here, no less untouchable than the *mangs*, also avoid the company of the *mangs*. They have acquired some brahmanical traits, and consider themselves to be superior to the *mangs*—they also get polluted by the shadow of *mangs*! Do the stony-hearted brahmans, who proudly roam around in their so-called holy clothes to proclaim their superiority, ever feel even a frisson of compassion for us when we suffer so much on account of being labelled untouchables? Nobody gives us employment because we are untouchables. No job means no money. We have to endure grinding poverty. O learned pundits, fold up your selfish priestcraft and stop the prattle of your hollow wisdom and listen to what I have to say. When our women give birth to babies, they do not have even a roof over their

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heads. How they suffer in the rain and the cold! Please try to understand it from your own experience. If they get some disease while giving birth, where will they get money for the doctor or medicines? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat such people free of cost?

The *mang* and *mahar* children never dare lodge a complaint even if the brahman children throw stones at them and injure them seriously. They suffer silently because they know they have to go to the brahman's houses to beg for the leftover food. Alas! O God! What agony this! I will burst into tears if I write more about this injustice. Because of such oppression, the merciful God has bestowed on us, this benevolent British government. Let us see how our pain has been mitigated under this government.

Earlier, Gokhale, Apate, Trimkaji, Andhala, Pansara, Kale, Behre, etc. [all brahman surnames], who showed their bravery by killing rats in their homes, persecuted us, not sparing even pregnant women, without any rhyme or reason. This has stopped now. Harassment and torture of *mahars* and *mangs*, common during the rule of Peshwas in Pune, have stopped. Now, human sacrifice for the foundation of forts and mansions has stopped—now, nobody buries us alive. Now, our population is growing in numbers. Earlier, if any *mahar* or *mang* wore fine clothes, they would say that only brahman should wear such clothes. Seen in fine clothes, we were earlier accused of stealing such clothes. Their religion was in danger of being polluted when untouchables put clothes around their bodies; they would tie them to tree and punish them. But, under British rule, anybody with money can buy and wear clothes. Earlier, punishment for any wrong-doing against the upper castes

THE REVOLT OF A DALIT GIRL

was to behead the guilty untouchable— now, it has stopped. Excessive and exploitative tax has stopped. The practice of untouchability has stopped in some places. Killing has stopped on the playground. Now, we can even visit the market place. Under the impartial British rule, many such things have happened. As I write this, I am amazed that the brahmans who earlier used to treat us like dirt, as I have written above, want to free us from our suffering. Not all the brahmans though. Those who are influenced by Satan continue to hate us like before. They target and outcaste the brahmans who are trying to liberate us. Some noble souls have started schools for *mahars* and *mangs*, and such schools are supported by the merciful British government. Oh, the *mahars* and *mangs*, you are poor and sick. Only the medicine of knowledge will cure and heal you. It will take you away from wild beliefs and superstitions. You will become righteous and moral. It will stop your exploitation. People who treat you like animals, will not dare to treat like that any more. So please work hard and study. Get educated and become good human beings. But I cannot even prove this. For example, those who have received good education also sometimes surprise us by doing very bad deeds!



A RELENTLESS TRUTHSEEKER

VICTOR PAUL

A popular maxim equates ignorance with bliss. But is ignorance bliss? Isn't it an erroneous and deeply deceptive notion, as it seeks to justify, even encourage, a state of mind which projects a negative, regressive and destructive attitude in the garb of the innocent, the sublime and the virtuous?

Only one person's ignorance can be another's bliss. This is especially true in the context of the social, spiritual, cultural and political state of affairs in India. The discriminatory and exploitative brahmanical social order—viewed as a religiously ordained caste system—fully endorses and justifies the application of 'ignorance as bliss' in a most diabolic manner.

The ignorance-is-bliss formulation makes way for a depraved humanity to stretch its imagination to unfathomable depths where a person can aspire, without any qualms, to attain a position of power and authority for oneself. Once convinced of the state of ignorance in one's fellow beings, one appropriates the right to conform them to

one's own interpretation of life, its meaning, its direction and the fulfillment of its destiny. Such a formulation justifies privileges and benefits for one at the expense of another. This happens because in the deepest recesses of one's mind and heart, every self-centered person desires to rule over other people.

Ignorance can never be blissful. But, yes, it can be deceptively turned around to manifest a charade of nobility that makes allowance for the perpetrator to be cast in an admirably positive light. The victim of such a demeaning power play can be lulled, into believing they are in safe and secure environs by cunningly crafted ideologies, folklore and tales of heroism. Psychologically, it can be devastating for a society as a whole since it carries in itself the potential to lure the masses into fatalistic resignation. Such a regressive mode of behavior and attitude would be suitably aligned with the self-centered motives of the perpetrator, through a lethal blend of noble ideological posturing and ignoble socio-political aspirations. Caste-brahmanism and its artful promoters have for centuries, been doing this with Machiavellian zeal—a process that continues in modern India, albeit in vastly different forms.

Take, for example, British rule and the national movement in India. Innumerable volumes have been written about British India from nationalist perspectives. Most of such commentaries and texts, generally awash with the brahmanical worldview, represent the British as the alien perpetrators of imperialistic injustice and barbarity. India is portrayed as a helpless victim, at the receiving end of the British onslaught. Needless to say, such sweeping constructs are not only simplistic but grossly elitist—under the guise of

nationalism—as they do not take into account the common people’s perspective.

Every nationalist movement, as we know, has to base itself upon a victor/victim paradigm, which invariably portrays the complex reality in black and white. Nationalism in India is no exception to this. While depicting the British period as a shameful and forgettable episode in an otherwise glorious historical and cultural saga of *their* nation, the nationalists conveniently overlook the fact that they themselves were the greatest beneficiaries of the plunder of the colonial era. Not surprisingly, almost all nationalist intellectual exercises of the period, appear to be an attempt to hoodwink the masses by blaming the British for all uncomfortable and nefarious internal issues. This is a classic example of a *perverse blissful ignorance* because at the end of the day, patriotism or nationalism is nothing but an elitist relay race for power and aggrandizement. Tolstoy succinctly presents this view in his *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence*:

Patriotism in its simplest, clearest, and most indubitable signification is nothing but a means of obtaining for the rulers their ambitious desires, and for the ruled the abdication of human dignity, reason and conscience, and slavish enthrallment to those in power.

(cited in Mani 2005: 343)

This Tolstoyan thesis fully applies to the Indian national movement and its leading luminaries, including, Gandhi. However, all along the human history there have been some exceptionally committed men and women who have defied

the established norms of society and challenged the authority and legitimacy of the oppressive regimes, charting new courses and currents.

Phules, the path-finders

In the life and struggle of the Phules, Savitribai and Jotirao, we have such a legacy which defies the oppressive orthodoxy and challenges the status quo maintained by the entrenched vested interests. The relevance and significance of the message from this extraordinary couple is still pertinent for the exploited majority. If India is to be delivered and redeemed from the social, political and spiritual baggage of the past and the present, it would be well in the interest of the nation to fully understand the message of Savitribai and Jotiba Phule and take it up in the right earnest.

Unacknowledged and underplayed by the upper casteist nationalist leadership, it was left to the likes of Jotirao and Savitribai Phule, the representatives of marginalised India, to acknowledge and appreciate the positive spin-offs of the British rule in the everyday life of common people. The brahmanism-in-power would not have allowed lower caste gardeners like Jotirao and Savitribai to be even acknowledged, let alone revered, as a man and woman of any significance. The emergence of the Phules was made possible by the fresh air of new democratic consciousness brought in the wake of British rule. British India—when brahmanism was on its backfoot—created a favourable climate for the Phules to appear and speak with a loud, clear and strong voice for the faceless and the voiceless, encompassing 85 per cent of the country's population. It was in British India that

some people from dalit and other backward classes (*shudras* and *atishudras*) found freedom through education.

Phule, himself from a *shudra* background and a victim of caste discrimination, wanted to harness people's power by opening the doors of education—with its emancipatory potential—to them. He constantly stressed the need for mass education for liberation of the oppressed based on new social and moral values. In 1883, Phule submitted a memorandum to the Hunter Commission on educational reforms in which he emphasised the fact that lower castes had systematically been denied the right to learning and education. Phule was the first to rise up against the brahmanical knowledge tyranny. His campaign for universal education created a new consciousness among the oppressed for learning.

Phule educated his wife Savitribai and it was he, who instilled in her a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. With Phule as her mentor, she learnt to oppose and stand against social injustice and discrimination.

The Phules have now risen above the horizon of contemporary India like a phoenix. Their sane and powerful voices for a casteless society are now being heard, bringing into prominence the egalitarian dimension of their struggles. The rumbling echoes of their compelling voices are now reverberating in the socio-political realms across India and pose a threat to the diabolical caste system which has held this country in captivity for more than three thousand years. It is now becoming evident that their voices had been deliberately overlooked, undermined and suppressed because they represented *that productive majority* who were denied

the opportunity to understand or define their role in the so-called freedom movement.

Tradition of counter-culture

What was the socio-cultural background of the Phule couple's revolutionary agenda for a new India? If we leave aside the pre-historic oral traditions, the origins of their spirited struggle can be traced back to the socio-religious movement started by Buddha in the sixth century BC. Buddhism gained popular acceptance because it dealt with the universal problem of pain and suffering. Obviously, the solution for common human suffering was not to be found in the caste-centric Vedic-brahmanic religion which advocated and even justified the suffering—and oppression—of the toiling masses, both men and women. Buddha broke free and precipitated a widespread reaction against the oppressive brahmanic thinking. The egalitarian orientation of Buddhism made it popular among the common people. Buddhism further consolidated its position when Emperor Ashoka gave it royal patronage, making it influential in a large part of the continent.

Along with Buddhism, India has witnessed a string of counter-cultural movements that professed and propagated a worldview that was radically opposed to the Vedic-brahmanic celebration of caste and its consequences. Despite time and spatial differences, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, the Saint-poets of the Bhakti movement and a host of other socio-spiritual leaders, gave a strikingly similar message—caste is divisive, oppressive, inhuman, and hence unacceptable.

Savitribai and Jotirao Phule are the two pioneering Indians who innovatively carried forward this socio-spiritual tradition—rooted in monotheism and egalitarianism—which ran counter to the Aryan-brahmanic polytheism and casteism. Phules' radical response to the caste-obsessed Aryan-brahmanism, sets them apart from their upper caste contemporaries who were not averse to defining their identity and destiny in the ascriptive value system of the brahmanical religion. Viewed from this standpoint, their struggle against caste and the brahmanical priestcraft acquires an interesting dimension worthy of a deeper investigation and research.

Phules and Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi acknowledged Jotirao Phule as the real Mahatma (the Great Soul) of India. What is not popularly known is that Mahatma Phule's wife Savitribai, was an outstanding leader in her own right, who is belatedly being acknowledged as the Mother of Modern Education in India. Of course, it was the influence of Jotirao which transformed her from a simple, humble woman into a courageous and dynamic leader able to hold her ground under challenging situations—a revolutionary path-finder.

A comparison between Gandhi, the much-admired but little understood Mahatma who is generally presented as God's gift to India, and Savitribai at any level may appear out-of-place or even improbable, but it is not. Dig into hard reality, and Gandhi surfaces as a conservative conformist while Savitribai was, for all practical purposes, a radical non-conformist. We get an uncommon insight into the real

and imagined India through the sharply contrasting views and approaches of Gandhi and Savitribai. Their treatment of issues like social justice and pursuance of truth, brings into sharp focus many underlying realities which have hitherto been ignored and obfuscated in the national debate. In his trailblazing history of India, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, Braj Ranjan Mani writes:

A great panegyric myth has been created around Gandhi and his nationalist politics. In fact what passes off as modern Indian historiography is but a hagiography of Gandhi and Gandhism.... Behind the glamour of seamless unity and patriotism, Gandhi's politics was unambiguously centered around tenacious—though highly imaginative—defense of caste and the whole socio-cultural paraphernalia associated with the brahmanic order.

(2005: 347-8)

Contrary to popular perception, Gandhi throughout his life deviously defended the brahmanic caste culture which clubs women and untouchables with dogs and cattle. Dharmashastras like *Manusmriti* that Gandhi was so enamoured of, forfeit the right of education and emancipation of all except brahman. He saw social hierarchy as natural and desirable. His politics was oriented to maintain the status quo, and not to empower the caste oppressed or to ensure social justice (Aloysius 1997, Mani 2005). Gandhi and his philosophy of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (striving for truth) are known the world over. What is little understood is his studied silence on the

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cries and woes of millions of Indians, the victims of caste-system which Gandhi upheld and guarded till his very last.

The Gandhian bliss of ignorance—the real face of caste and brahmanism—is a dangerous proposition. Besides, truth and non-violence seldom go hand in hand. Whoever breaks away from the dominant milieu to chart a new course, has to face heavy odds. In fact, they have to take on the forces of darkness. In other words, Gandhi merely pretended to stand up for truth—his brand of truth actually defended caste and brahmanism. A selfish politician is different from a social revolutionary. There is a difference between a Gandhi and a Phule. In more ways than one, Gandhi and Phule can be defined as classic representatives of two opposing worldviews.

Let us see an incident from Savitribai's life, which sets her apart from nationalists like Gandhi. It is doubtful whether Gandhi would have risen above himself to defend a dalit at the risk of his own life. It is a known fact that throughout his life Gandhi bitterly opposed Ambedkar, a dalit, at every given opportunity. But Savitribai was made of different stuff. When she saw a brahman being wronged, she took a non-partisan stand for the truth even though the brahmans were her strongest opponents.

In 1868, Savitribai had come down from Pune to her mother's house in Naigaon, Khandala, to recover from some illness. A brahman called Ganesh, who earned his living by performing religious rites, fell in love with Sharja, a *mahar* (dalit) girl. This was sacrilegious. The brahmans could use dalit girls as objects of their lust under the cover of darkness but a loving relationship was out of bounds between these two communities. There was uproar in the village. The

enraged community leaders decided to mete out an exemplary punishment to the erring couple to forestall recurrence of such incidents in future. They hatched a plot to kill them.

On coming to know this, Savitribai came to the village square where the violent crowd was gathering around the hapless couple who had no means of escape. Savitri saw the fear of death writ large upon their faces. Knowing that reasoning with the blood-thirsty people would be of no avail, she sternly warned the villagers against committing such a grave offence lest they be caught and tried for charges of murder under the new British law. The rampaging mob understood, relented, and slowly left the place leaving Savitribai alone with the two lovers. She then wrote a letter to her husband who was in Pune, informing him about the incident, and asking him to help the couple find a place of refuge and some means of livelihood in the city, since they could now no longer live safely in the village.

Thus a tragedy was averted and two lives saved because one woman of immense courage and conviction, harbouring no thoughts of prejudice and vindictiveness, though having every reason to do so, chose to practice what she preached. This is a striking instance of her personal integrity and social commitment. She could very well have chosen to defend the *mahar* girl and leave the brahman boy to fend for himself. Instead, she persevered in truth and stood for justice.

Take another instance of her noble and socially committed character. In 1875-6, a famine broke out in western Maharashtra. Humans and cattle were perishing without food and water. In the midst of all this tragedy, the evil and greedy moneylenders were out to make the most out

of the poor farmer's need for food and succour. The Satyashodhak volunteers, led by Savitribai, were engaged in the relief work, doing their utmost to salvage lives and goods out of the ruinous situation. Finding them to be a hindrance, the moneylenders levelled false accusations of rioting against them before the administration and had them arrested. In protest, Savitribai led a delegation to the office of the Collector and informed him about the police highhandedness and the mischief of moneylenders. Humbled by her straight talk, the Collector scolded the policemen and asked them to immediately set the Satyashodhaks free. He personally got involved with the relief work and praised Savitribai for her courage and commitment.

The shining legacy

Without a sense of history and the socio-cultural context of the time, we cannot understand the significance of Savitribai Phule's work. A proper understanding of the socio-cultural climate of her time is essential to realise the great significance of her struggle against the prevailing social norms, religious beliefs and cultural moorings. She bravely endured personal trauma, societal rejection and public humiliation because she was a real truthseeker who continued her quest for truth under most trying circumstances.

The shining example of Savitribai Phule overshadows the more well-known names of our nation. Rejecting ignorance as slavery, she relentlessly opposed, fought and overcame evils of untruth with the power of truth. It is

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heartening that we, as a nation, are now becoming sensitive to the alternative history of India which is honouring, even if belatedly, the real stalwarts who have conspiratorially been kept away from mainstream national life.



BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S LIFE

- 03.01.1831 Born in Naigaon in the district of Satara, Maharashtra
- 1840 Married to Jotirao Phule
- 1841 Begins informal education at home
- 1847 Is trained as a teacher from Ahmednagar
- 1848 Establishes the first school with husband Jotirao at Pune for downtrodden girls
- 1849 Helps in establishing more schools at Pune, Satara, Ahmednagar
- 1849 Is turned out of her in-laws' home with husband for teaching 'untouchables' and lower castes
- 1852 Establishes two more schools
- 1852 Gets the Model Teacher's Award
- 16.11.1852 Department of Education felicitates the Phule couple for their pioneering educational work

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S LIFE

- 1854 *Kabya Phule*, her collection of poetry is published
- 1855 Establishes a night-school for workers and peasants
- 1856 Edits and publishes a collection of Jotirao's speeches
- 1863 Establishes a home for illegitimate children and their mothers
- 1868 Opens the household water-tank to 'untouchables'
- 24.09.1873 Actively participates in the foundation of Satyashodhak Samaj
- 1874 Adopts Yashwant, the son of a Brahman widow
- 1875-77 Leads Satyashodhak volunteers to help famine-affected people in western Maharashtra
- 28.11.1890 Husband Jotirao dies
- 1891 *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar*, her verse collection is published
- 1893 Takes over leadership of Satyashodhak Samaj, elected its president
- 1896 Works intensively during yet another famine
- 10.03.1897 Dies while serving plague-affected people



SAVITRIBAI PHULE'S WORKS

Kabya Phule (Anthology of poetry)

Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar (Anthology of poetry)

Jotiba Bhashane Vol. I to IV (Collection of Jotiba's speeches,
edited by Savitri)

Savitribaichi Bhashane va Gani (Collection of Savitri's
speeches and songs)



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AGGRESSION

MEENA KANDASAMY

Ours is a silence
that waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it
any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions
end in our bemoaning thr tragedy.

Sometimes

The outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode.

Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.

APOLOGIES FOR LIVING ON

MEENA KANDASAMY

I am living on
because providing apologies is easy
once—

I was making choices
with insanely safe ideas of
fleeing—madly and flying away

I was a helpless girl
Against the brutal world of
Bottom— patting and breast -pinching

I was craving for security
and kind I had only known while
aimlessly-afloat and speculating in the womb

now—

I am locked away

A terrified princess waiting
for—death and not any brave prince

I don't dream or think
I just remember and wince
At voices of the past smirking in sarcasm

once—

I ran away in the darkness
nothing beacons me more than the
prospect of solitude and the caress of a
million stars

I ran into the arms of the ravishing night
nothing pulled me back: not even the memories
of love— I had once known and stolen kisses savoured for so
long.

I ran until terror stopped my tracks for,

trembling I turned and saw the moon was another immodest
ogler and lecherous stalker.

DON'T LOOK INTO THE VANITY BAG

VAIDEHI

To thrust your hand into a vanity bag,
And to examine its contents, O men, is never proper
In the name of 'vanity' there could be ever so many things
there;
does anyone expose them?
A mirror, comb, collyrium,
a petty box, pen, powder, clip, perfume,
a white sheet and a ball of string – all these could be there
There could be a button, needle and an areca- nut piece;
Even tamarind seeds also could lie there.

Is there any rule laid down by anybody
That there should only be peas in a vanity bag?
There could as well be ginger peppermints and comfit.

It's possible to find there traces of dry leaves and flowers,
and the road- map to reach somebody's house; memories
of the moisture of the red soil, beneath the canopy of a tree.

The aroma of cinnamon,
and peacock feathers that breed,
may have safely preserved those small days;
there could lie sand and soil brought from somewhere.

Half written poems could ve crawling there,
in the unending darkness;
a hot sigh hidden in a hand – kerchief
could be gurgling in the throat there.

Within the empty envelope bearing an address,
There could only be the picture of the red sun;
The breath of the letter received could be a puzzle,
Bound with charming words,

and an ink—drop like a nose-pearl around those charming words.

There may lie intoxication of a tune of intense passion;
there could also be a nameless photograph,
of a sparkling smile under a sprouting black moustache.

Shadows of childhood, youth and old age
could have crept into that sheath;
and passions of the married, the harlot and the lovehorn,
in disguise-different roles assigned by moral codes.

Aren't there living together how- so many pairs ,
With nothing to relate each other, whatsoever?
Similar are the worlds within this bag.

The world within the bag and the world of the mind-
Do you weigh them to see if they are the same?
O, you idiotic mean males!
Why do you tire out your hands in vain?

You cannot weigh faulty equations.

Never can you peer
into the mind; searching,
you can never take out anything,
Even if you can, after frantic search,
take out the essence lying within the bag,
Never should you do so.

What's inside the bag should never, ever, be seen.

TELL ME, YOU WHO KNOW . . .

VAIDEHI

Tell me,

You who know of poetry –

I know nothing of it

But I know what rasam is.

Do you think it's a mere nothing?

It calls for a blend

Of the principles of water,

Aroma and essence –

A tempered state reached after simmering . . .

Thus . . .

There it was in the corner,

A container with rasam,

On a seemingly dead and ash-covered

Coalfire, waiting and waiting . . .

Does it matter that it waits?

In the great durbar of meat dishes

Seasoned with spices that sparkled,

Of servers who danced as they walked,

Of laughter and chatter,

It had waited, since morning,

The clear rasam on a seemingly dead

Coalfire, simmering,

Still fresh even at night.

You who know all about poetry,

Tell me,

Do you know what rasam is?

Forgive me,

I don't know any poetry.

MOTHER

P LANKESH

My mother,
black, prolific earth mother,
a green leaf, a festival of white flowers;
earthier with every burn,
with every pang
more fruit and petal;
her limbs thrilled to children's kicks:
laying down the basket on her head,
she groaned, closed her eyes, never opened them again.

She raised a hundred measures of millet
to please my father
and win a bracelet for her arm;
swilling water for each clod of earth,
for pepper, pea, millet and grain,
she ploughed with her hand:
blossoming in flowers, ripening in fruit,
she watched over the fields,
spending her youth in a tatter of saris.

She died, she did:
what's the age of a hag bent double?
how many new year moons,
how many festival of sugar bread
over the live coals? How many times

had she wept, this woman,
for coin, for dead calf, for ruined grain?
How many times had she roamed the villages
for some ancient runaway buffalo?

No, she was no Savitri,
no Sita or Urmila,
no heroin out of history books,
tranquil, fair and grave in dignity;
nor like the wives of Gandhi and Ramakrishna.
She didn't worship the gods
or listen to holy legends;
she didn't even wear, like a good wife,
any vermilion on her brow.

A wild bear
bearing a litter of little ones,
she reared a husband, saved coins in a knot of cloth;
like a hurt bitch, she bared her teeth,
growled and fought.
She was mean, crooked, ready to scratch like a monkey;
her only rule: whatever raises a family.
She would burn and flare
if a son went wild, or the husband elsewhere.

A jungle bear has no need for your Gita.

My mother lived
for stick and grain, labour and babies;
for a rafter over her head,
rice, bread, a blanket;
to walk upright among equals.

Admiration, tears, thanks:
for bearing and raising us;
for living in mud and soil, for leaving as she did,
as if leaving home for the fields,
cool as usual,
in the middle of small talk.

NIGHT OF THE SCORPIAN

- NISSIM EZEKIEL

I remember the night my mother
Was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
Of steady rain had driven him
To crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison – flash
Of diabolic tail in the dark room –
He risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the name of God a hundred times
To paralyse the Evil One.

With candles and with lanterns
Throwing giant scorpion shadows
On the mud-baked walls
They searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved
in Mother's blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease
The misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
May the sum of all evil
Balanced in this unreal world

Against the sum of good
Become diminished by your pain.
May the poison purify your flesh

Of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
They said, and they sat around
On the floor with my mother in the centre,
The peace of understanding on each face.
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
More insects, and the endless rain.
My mother twisted through and through,
Groaning on a mat.
My father, sceptic, rationalist,
Trying every curse and blessing,
Powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison
with an incantation.
After twenty hours
It lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T.S

- NISSIM EZEKIEL

Friends,

Our dear sister

Is departing for foreign

In two three days,

And

We are meeting today

To wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,

What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.

I don't mean only external sweetness

But internal sweetness.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling

Even for no reason but simply because

She is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming

From very high family.

Her father was renowned advocate

In Bulsar or Surat,

I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,

Once only I stayed in Surat

With family members

Of my uncle's very old friend-

His wife was cooking nicely...

That was long time ago.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa

She is most popular lady

With men also and ladies also.

Whenever I asked her to do anything,

She was saying, 'Just now only

I will do it.' That is showing

Good spirit. I am always

Appreciating the good spirit.

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.

Whatever I or anybody is asking

She is always saying yes,

And today she is going

To improve her prospect

And we are wishing her bon voyage.

Now I ask other speakers to speak

And afterwards Miss Pushpa

Will do summing up.

PATRIOT

NISSIM EZEKIEL

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting -
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.
Other day I'm reading newspaper
(Every day I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language)
How one goonda fellow
Threw stone at Indirabehn.
Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.
Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying (to myself)
Lend me the ears.
Everything is coming -
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.
Be patiently, brothers and sisters.
You want one glass lassi?
Very good for digestion.
With little salt, lovely drink,
Better than wine;
Not that I am ever tasting the wine.
I'm the total teetotaller, completely total,
But I say
Wine is for the drunkards only.
What you think of prospects of world peace?
Pakistan behaving like this,
China behaving like that,
It is making me really sad, I am telling you.
Really, most harassing me.
All men are brothers, no?
In India also
Gujaratis, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs
All brothers -

Though some are having funny habits.
Still, you tolerate me,
I tolerate you,
One day Ram Rajya is surely coming.
You are going?
But you will visit again
Any time, any day,
I am not believing in ceremony
Always I am enjoying your company.

MOTHER AND SARI

That night,
hoping to dream a sweet dream
I slept swathed in the warmth
of mother's tattered sari.
When winter licked my body
I cried 'Avva ...'
and snuggled into her lap.

Eating stale rice and payasa
from the feast at the gowda's wedding
my stomach began to rumble and
I shat on mother's clothes.
She covered me
with an old sari that someone
had washed and given her.

When mosquitoes kissed up
The blood of my shrunken body, ,

I whimpered and hugged Avva.
When my little legs found their Way
Inside through a tear
And touched her thighs,
She shuddered, remembering
Father, who died drunk.

Once when the rain
Dripped down from the eye of our hut,
I woke up
Eating the hailstones
Scattered in the middle room
One by one, I chuckled.
But mother cried
Holding in her hand
A wet sari.

----- NK HANUMANTHAIH

ELEPHANTS MELTING IN THE MOUTH OF AN EARTHWORM

A sculptor

Carved hundreds of

Elephants and chariots

On a mustard seed

And twirled his moustache.

He began to laugh

At the legs and hands of time

Which began to rot and fall

In front of the mustard seed.

A small bird

Which flew from the electric wire

Swallowed the mustard seed.

The sculptor collapsed;

When he opened his Eyes

In front of him

Was a mustard plant.

The elephants and chariots

Which had fallen under it

Were melting in the mouth

Of an earthworm.

NK HANUMANTHAI AH

THE TIGRESS

PRATHIBA NANDAKUMAR

He is the animal trainer

Makes even the fiercest of fierce animals

Crawl, jump, stand on hind legs

Just by the crack of his whip.

He puts his head between

The dangerous teeth of the tiger

Pats his appreciation

Waits in anticipation

Of applause.

This tigress

That roamed the deep jungle,

Terror of the forest,

Now sits cross-legged in front of him.

Is she a tigress or what?

Someone once asked her about it.

She just smiled and brought out

Her long sharp nails

Hidden well under her paws

And scratched her head.

THE HOUSE WIFE

PRATHIBHA NANDA KUMAR

Hey you

Always buying the best tooth-paste

For the whole family

Using the costly soap that makes him love you more

Wearing the sari bought at a sale from the 40 % discount counters,

How do you cook, in just two minutes

Wash the cloths looking like a goddess?

The secret of freshness

Is the new orange five minute peel off face mask...

Tell me..

How much did they pay you

For your smile?

Midnight.

Daughter wakes up

Goes searching

The hand that was writing a poem, stops

Picks her up and pets her back to sleep.

When I return to my desk

The poem had gone to sleep.

And suddenly a woman 's wail at midnight

It's a week since we moved in here,

Strange place, stranger people.

The fear of the unknown

Mingled with the lightness of the great escape.

The sounds of the latest teleserials drown

The cooker's whistle.

Even at ten there is laughter next door.

Not able to hit a nail to hang the mosquito curtains

We give up and light a coil.

Sleep eludes. Tossing and turning

Finally, my eyes give in

Suddenly, a woman's wail,

Stifling words held tight behind

The end of the sari stuffed into the mouth,

It's surely a man's voice coming forth

From between clenched teeth.

Was it my imagination,

That thud of pushing?

Sleep forgotten

I try to figure out the source,

Of the wail.

Peep out of the window

To be mocked by the dark.

Who could it be ?

One from the opposite house or

The next door neighbour or

The one upstairs?

Before I could find out,

It stopped as abruptly as it had started.

Was it a hand that put out the wailing or...

Like me, did she also brush aside the hand

And walk out, never to return?

Did she learn to walk with steps bleeding

On this dark night , to reach a new destination

Where she could breath freely?

I don't know,

But the stifled midnight wail of a woman

That stopped abruptly,

Haunts me to this day.



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